

**Telephone interview with Robert Lemke, former staff member of Destroyer Squadron 23 embarked aboard USS *Kirk* (DE-1087) during Operation Frequent Wind, April-May, 1975. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 29 April 2009.**

**I thought we'd talk today about your recollections of what happened during Operation Frequent Wind 34 years ago.**

Absolutely.

**I had a conversation last week with former Secretary of Defense, James Schlesinger. Interestingly, he had few recollections about the details of that operation. He wasn't really that involved in what was going on in the fleet during that time. I would have thought there was a lot of cooperation or at least communication with the task force commander. But, apparently, you guys were kind of on your own.**

I certainly didn't know at my level where all the information was coming from. But there was certainly a tremendous coordination. Just before the fall of Saigon, we had all those ships out there. Obviously, that was directed. We had a tremendous support staff and MSC [Military Sealift Command] ships were in the area and all that had to be coordinated at least at the fleet level.

**I'm sure SECDEF knew the broad outline of what was happening but the actual rescue of the South Vietnamese navy was a mystery to him as was the role of Armitage and the plan that he came up with. I asked him if he had come up with the plan and relayed it to Armitage and he said no. The plan was Armitage's brain child and he was on his own.**

**But to get to your experiences, you were already embarked on *Kirk* with CAPT Roane.**

I was with Destroyer Squadron 23 and we were embarked on the *Kirk*.

**Were you on from the beginning of that cruise?**

The majority of it, yes. We departed *Kirk* when we returned to Subic Bay with the South Vietnamese navy. We then went to another ship. As it turns out, a week and a half later, we were working with the rescue of the *Mayaguez*. We had been with the *Kirk* for probably six or eight weeks.

**What do you remember about the ship and the general shape of the crew. You had probably been aboard other ships during your career. How did that cruise on *Kirk* sit with you?**

I was extremely familiar with the *Kirk* and her crew. I had just come to DESRON 23 there on the staff from being a commissioning engineer on the 1086, the ship built just before *Kirk*. So I saw the *Kirk* being launched in Avondale. I always had a close relationship with that particular ship. I had no idea that later in my life that relationship would continue.

The ship itself was a relatively new ship and in excellent material condition. I had a close relationship especially with the engineer [Hugh Doyle], the engineering staff, and the people who were up in combat because that's where I as a materiel officer worked. We did all of our communications and watch-standing on the bridge or in Combat. CAPT Jacobs was an excellent person to work with. As I saw it, he and his crew were excellent support for the staff as we needed it.

**So even though you were embarked as a member of Commodore Roane's staff, you took part in other activities on the ship standing watches and that type of thing.**

We stood watches for the staff and the staff also stood watches in Combat because I was a materials officer and because I was very familiar with the ship and engineering. I roamed the ship a lot because I had spent a lot of time on that class of ship.

**What was your rank at that time?**

I was a lieutenant. I was coming on my sixth year of commissioned service. This was my fourth deployment on a ship to Vietnam. Even though I had been there for three previous deployments this was the first time working with the refugees where I had an opportunity to get a little one-on-one or close contact with the Vietnamese. As you know, you can be on a Navy ship and be on deployment and doing all these support things at sea, but never really get inland.

I do recall the weeks before Saigon fell, we'd been receiving reports from some of the larger MSC ships that had gone different places to pick up refugees in rather large numbers. They had a lot of lessons learned for us. One was to make sure that people who were carrying valuables such as gold or weapons, it's really wise to confiscate and log that type of thing in beforehand because of security concerns. There had been problems with larger groups of people on those MSC ships, concerns over food distribution, and security issues. We received a lot of these messages. It had been a little ugly so we wanted to make sure that we properly screened the people coming on board any of the ships so those problems wouldn't happen again. That's the reason that when helicopters began landing on *Kirk*, that the supply officers were up there checking in any valuables and that the weapons guys--gunner's mates--were up there collecting any kind of weapons and stashing them into our overflowing armory. The armory wasn't very large and there were a lot of weapons coming aboard.

**So you stacked them in a particular place?**

We had an armory, which was a rather large secure steel closet. The ship would store its small arms there. We'd get the weapons (small arms) from the refugees on the flight deck and then the weapons would be taken down one or two levels to the armory. The first 50 or 60 weren't a problem but when we got hundreds of weapons, the armory became full stacked from floor to ceiling. These weapons were disposed of later.

**Having spoken to many of the other crewmembers and certainly CAPT Jacobs, you guys were out there offshore maybe 30 miles.**

No. On the day Saigon fell, the ships were pulled in much closer. They were assigned areas like a huge parking lot so that we could steam back and forth at maybe 5 knots. Every ship was assigned an area to stay in because there were a lot of ships out there in a relatively small area.

The morning that Saigon actually fell, we were certainly within visual range of the coast. For some reason, that morning I was up very early and in Combat. We had a large radar repeater and I was looking at where all the ships were on the grid. But then I was looking at the coastline for navigational purposes. And it really seemed blurry. I spoke to one of the radar techs there and said, "Have we tuned up the radar recently? It seems that it's losing some of its fidelity." He said it was fine.

I went topside. We had a large set of binoculars on the flying bridge. We called them the “big eyes.” It was just about dawn and I recall looking at the coastline. I was watching for quite a while, there were so many people leaving the coast by anything that floated and coming out toward the ships. The radar looked a little fuzzy only because there was so much activity on the water. Much later in the day we would actually see some of these craft as they came out to find refuge on the ships. These craft could be something as large as a little fishing vessel or something as small as a floating rubber raft.

One of the things I remember quite well was a small boat with a family of three or four--a husband, wife, two children--and they were on some kind of a wooden dugout. They were out there in the ocean a couple of miles offshore. On that dugout were all of the family possessions, including a little motorbike. I was looking at that motorbike and thinking that it wasn't going to make it onto a ship. These people were simply paddling out to sea hoping to get to those rescue ships. And at the same time, the helicopters were coming out.

At that time, we had no knowledge of what was happening with the South Vietnamese navy as they were departing down the rivers.

**Do you recall picking up any of those folks on the small craft?**

We didn't. We directed them to other places because that's not what we were tasked to do. As a matter of fact, there was some danger in picking people and how you would do it. So most of the ships were directed to steam along at about 3-5 knots just so that people couldn't come alongside. I don't recall us picking up anyone. I think that day we received all our refugees via the helicopters.

**You got to see a lot of the helos landing.**

Oh, absolutely. That was something. I got a chance to help push them over the side. Anyone who wasn't actually on watch helped get the people off the aircraft. Some of these Hueys were carrying a tremendous number of people--15 or 20. We had to make sure they weren't armed, make sure that if they had valuables, that we checked them in. That was being done on the spot and very efficiently. Then we had to get rid of the aircraft because we wanted to clear the flight deck to be able to open it up for another pilot and helicopter. I recall how strange it felt to actually push one of these aircraft over the side. As they went over they would kind of flip over and go in upside down. I thought, “What an awful end for all those aircraft.” But, of course, that was the right thing to do so we could save lives.

One of the aircraft was an Air America helicopter. That one we saved by putting it up beside the hangar.

**Did you witness that big CH-47 Chinook that came in?**

Yes. I saw that.

**What do you recall about that incident?**

The hair is standing up on my arms thinking about it. The Chinook came over and it was obviously much larger than we could take on our flight deck. I witnessed an excellent display of flightmanship. The rear ramp was open and the pilot hovered that aircraft so the ramp was over our flight deck and as close to the flight deck as was practical. That was anywhere from a minimum of three feet--maybe waste high--to about the height of a sailor. Up and down three to seven feet. It was close enough for people, with some assistance, to actually jump to the flight deck and maybe get some help from the sailors who were there. Of course, the most dramatic

thing was parents passing their young children off the back of that ramp into the arms of a waiting sailor and trusting the lives of their child to someone they didn't know. A Chinook can carry a large number of people. I don't know what the number is but it seems amazing the number of people who kept coming off this aircraft.

After everyone had gotten out, the last person who came off the aircraft, who I believe was in a flight suit, was the co-pilot. Then the pilot took the aircraft off our starboard bow and rolled the aircraft to starboard and he climbed out the port side and dove into the water. About the same time as he hit the water, the blades started hitting the water and flying in all directions. But the pilot was fine. The whole thing was like a slow motion deal. He did an excellent job of taking care of the people he saved and disposing of the aircraft so it wouldn't hurt anyone around it.

**One of the things I learned from the crew was that they never kept records of who came aboard. It just wasn't at the top of their priority list.**

It wasn't. You just have to boil it down to the simple things. We had to make sure the ship stayed safe and secure so that we could continue to do what we were asked to do. And, right after that, where are we going to put these people? That meant all the open areas topside were to be used. The crew had to put up makeshift awnings so we could shelter the people. Fortunately the weather was pleasant so we needed more shade than we needed sun.

Then there was feeding the people and also taking care of all the human waste. The people who did all that were the crewmembers of the *Kirk*. And it was all volunteers. I don't remember anyone who wasn't volunteering to do it, including one or two people who I specifically knew had been in trouble being in the military but who had no trouble putting in lots and lots of time for this humanitarian effort--hold the babies, feed the kids, wash clothes, whatever had to be done. And we had no idea how long those people were going to be there. The crewmembers became caretakers and they did it in a wonderful way. It gave me a great warm feeling to know that we were giving out love to people who certainly needed it after what they had just gone through.

**Do you recall when Armitage came aboard?**

I don't recall specifically when he arrived on board. I do know that shortly thereafter, the staff was being briefed and we would be taking off independently. We were going to rendezvous with the South Vietnamese navy at an island about 50 or 60 miles from there. Armitage to me was this stand-offish but interesting person. I didn't know who he was. I did speak to him but not that much. The captain, the commodore, and probably the executive officer and chief staff officer were communicating at that level. I'm sure that plan changed a lot as we steamed down there.

**I looked at the ship's log and I know that once you picked him up, which was about, as I recall, about 9 pm. And then there was a meeting, probably in the captain's quarters. And then Armitage laid out the plan that would take you down to Con Son Island. You ended up steaming all night and the following morning around dawn, you approached the harbor. Do you recall what you saw?**

My image is that it was amazingly calm and there were a variety of sizes of floating craft. They were all kind of together but a couple of them were underway trying to help each other out.

I do recall at least one vessel being towed by another vessel. And they were spread out over a distance of a mile or two.

**Hugh Doyle was trying to describe what he saw on a tape recording to his wife. He said it was like throwing a Hershey bar on a hot sidewalk in the summer and coming back an hour later and finding it covered with ants. That's what those ships looked like to him. What did it look like to you?**

As we got closer to any one of those vessels, each one looked like a crowded campsite. People needed protection from the sunlight so they had all kinds of awnings. Most of the ships didn't have any kind of sanitary facilities at all or they were totally inadequate for the numbers of people. They had ingeniously rigged shelter using bamboo or something like that. They would rig this over the sterns of the ships. They would put places where people could sit and relieve themselves over the ocean. It was amazing. There were lots of colors in their clothes. Although we were on the ocean, it seemed more to me like a scene in the desert where you have covers and tents. But the sea was so calm and God bless, it stayed like that for the next five or six days.

**And all these refugees had to be fed and provided with water.**

The big concerns become food and water. As we got to the ships we established communications and put American crewmembers on board some of the ships. This was before we were reflagging. This was so we could better assess the needs of these ships. Then it was a matter of using motor whaleboats, the captain's launch, things like this to deliver food and water. I recall, at one point, we got a bunch of rice. The *Kirk* would steam around and we'd deliver the rice in those small boats. Because of the calm condition of the sea, we were able to do that efficiently and in relative safety. If we hadn't had that calm sea, the whole story would have been different.

**Once you got everyone underway, there were two lines of ships steaming along at the fastest speed as the slowest ship.**

We were not steaming quickly. Maybe 5 knots was probably it. As they were going along, the *Kirk* would take station alongside and find out who needed what. We could actually transfer between the ships with our motor whaleboat and our captain's gig. The motor whaleboat just isn't that fast but it had enough speed to go from one ship to another. And some vessels were being towed by others. One or two of them were scuttled along the way. They were taking on just too much water. The Vietnamese transferred the people who were on those small craft onto a bigger ship.

**As you got closer to Subic, a major problem presented itself. The Marcos government would not allow these ships to come into port. South Vietnam had ceased to exist and, for one reason or another, Marcos didn't want to offend the new government.**

I do recall that we did not have permission to enter Subic Bay and, of course, that's where we were going. The details of how we were going to get access to Subic were unknown. But we had to get there relatively quickly.

**I haven't been able to determine who was conducting the negotiations but the ingenious idea of reflagging the vessels did come to the fore. By that time crewmembers of the *Kirk* had been put aboard these other ships. Anyway, the deal was made and I haven't**

**been able to determine even now whether it was a local decision made at Subic at an admiral's level or whether it was a government decision or whether the State Department was involved. But suffice it to say, there was a decision and reflagging seemed to be the best solution. How did you all collect enough flags?**

You've got it right. On most of the ships, we already had Navy personnel who we were communicating with. I recall the question, "Do you have any American flags?"

**Where did you get them from?**

Of course there were a number of them that are kept on the signal bridge and there were old ones kept to be burned later. Maybe we should have had someone with a sewing machine making them. Locally, there were orders cut to let the American sailors and the Vietnamese know that we were going to do the reflagging. There was a time set for that. I believe it was local noon.

I received a bunch of these envelopes with flags and orders. Using the captain's gig, we went out to deliver these orders and flags. We simply stopped at each ship and delivered these items. After all the flags and orders were delivered, I was taken to the ship where I was ordered.

**You took your orders from Commodore Roane?**

Yes. I worked for Commodore Roane.

**So Commodore Roane gave you these flags, or you collected these flags and put them into manila folders.**

Whatever the yeoman had.

**Were the orders cut aboard the *Kirk*?**

They were just like a letter order to let the people know officially. In most cases we were in radio communication so the people knew what was going to happen. And we'll get you the details as soon as we can get to the ships. We'll send out the gig and drop this stuff off.

**So you were handed something like 34 envelopes.**

Yes. We mostly had envelopes but sometimes we just had papers wrapped up in flags.

**The envelopes contained the orders as to how to conduct this little ceremony. And then there was a folded flag in each envelope if you had an envelope, or if there was no envelope, the orders were stuffed inside the flag.**

Right. And I specifically know that when I went to the ship that I was going to, we were wearing khakis and I just had a flag and that paperwork stuffed in my shirt.

**After delivering so many packages . . . and you'd just come up alongside and throw them a line?**

Actually they dropped the line down to us. They'd be towing a line, we'd come up alongside and then someone would come down from whatever ship or vessel we were going alongside, they would meet the gig and we'd hand over the package and go off to the next one. The transfer itself would only take a matter of seconds.

**At the end of all these deliveries, you ended up delivering a package and yourself to one of the ships.**

Yes. I went to the largest ship--HQ-03. That was the last ship to receive the flag and myself because I got the other deliveries done first. I got on board sometime after the scheduled time for the ceremony and that's why it was delayed on our ship. I don't know if the other ships had executed the transfer as scheduled, which I think was local noon. Ours didn't happen until about one hour after, maybe 1 o'clock.

**But as you recall, none of those ceremonies took place close to sundown.**

No. Certainly not on my ship, it was definitely in the early afternoon. I remember it quite well. I got on the ship. We had our American sailors already on board who had been aboard for several days. I met them on the bridge. They introduced me to the people in charge. They knew why I was there. I took the American flag from my shirt and handed it to them and said when it was appropriate, let's do the ceremony. What I didn't know was what type of ceremony there would be.

With hundreds of people on deck, the ship was well overcrowded. Every place had people. There was a IMC system so they could communicate with the people on the ship. Either the commanding officer or the officer in charge, which I believe was a flag officer, indicated to the people that the ceremony was about to take place. Everyone was silent and at that point someone started singing the South Vietnamese national anthem. It was extremely moving and extremely moving to me to even think about right now. As they sang, they slowly lowered their flag over that ship. And subsequently they raised the American flag. It's so moving to me now to think that this is when the people who had fought their way out of their own homeland just days before, were still under their own flag but then they had to see their nation's flag be lowered so they could move to safety. It was just another thing for them to have to give up and live with. There was no one speaking on the ship; it was extremely quiet and reverent.

Then we continued on under the American flag to Subic Bay. I'm not even certain then that we knew what was going to happen when we got there. By then we were only two days out of Subic. It wasn't that long after the reflagging of the ships that we were able to get into Subic Bay and get over to Grande Island.

**I heard from some folks that one of the other procedures that was required besides the reflagging was to dismantle the ship's armament and the ammo had to be thrown over the side. In some cases the Vietnamese HQ hull numbers and names had to be painted over. Do you recall any of that?**

I do not. On our ship we had some other issues but I don't recall that. I'm fairly certain that if it had happened on the ship I was on, it happened before I got on board. I just didn't see that at all. I do recall that we had a lot of people on board. My first evening I had a civilian representative from a number of the people on board. He came up to air a grievance. The grievance was that the people he represented on board were getting rice and water but they were not eating as well as some of the other people, as he pointed out, who were attached to the military who were getting a little better food, maybe some fish and that sort of thing. But he was a very respectful person. He wasn't making demands. He was just bringing it to my attention.

That differs significantly from the beginning and the concerns we had before the fall of Saigon that there was significant social unrest on some of the ships.

**There were riots on some of them.**

There were riots. The captains of the ships would report that there was gunfire through the night. People had been thrown overboard. And with a small crew you couldn't control the situation. The lesson learned was that when people came aboard, you had to make it safe and secure. But we witnessed none of that. Not only did these people have to go through hell to get out of their homeland, but they were honorable people. And we found out later how greatly talented they were. But they had to be talented just to be able to get that whole group out there and to take care of themselves with a little assistance from us. But to be able to manage that for over a week in conditions that you just didn't know from one day to the next what was going to happen. They really kept it together extremely well. We were there to assist them. If they didn't have the desire and determination, all of that was needed to make it happen.

**It's been 34 years since all this happened. Do you think about that time anymore?**

Once in awhile I do. For me, that six-month deployment saw some amazing events. It means more to me now than it did then. We were in the military and asked to do things and sometimes they were things we weren't specifically trained to do. But we just went out and did it to the best of our ability. It's not until you get a chance to reflect upon it that it might seem how remarkable it was. I know the minimum loss of life to these people proves that God's hand was in it. We were just the tools used to support the need.